

OLD TIMEY



HOLIDAY KITCHEN



CRANBERRY CAKE BY

CORA

P. CREEDEN

Cranberry Cake by Cora

Old Timey Holiday Kitchen Book 6

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The scent of snow filled Cora's nostrils as she drew in a deep breath. It was far too dark outside to tell for sure when exactly it would begin, but to the west, she could see nary a single star even though the east was dotted just above the first glow of sunrise barely brightening the sky at the horizon. It was early, but Cora often found herself getting up before the sun on colder days, like today to read. She also wanted to get a good fire started in the woodstove so that she could make a hearty breakfast for her father before he left for work. She pulled her shawl closer around her shoulders as excitement fluttered in her stomach. The first snow. She would have seen it by the end of November, had they still lived in Connecticut, but out west in Kansas City, she hadn't known what to expect. It had been an unseasonably warm summer and autumn, which held off the coming winter—Cora's favorite time of year.

Her impatience wouldn't get the best of her today. While she sang a hymn in a quiet whisper, her breath wrapped around her face in a cloud as she waited for more of the sky to lighten. Excitement squeezed her stomach harder when she realized that a low ceiling of clouds covered the blue. Gripping the meager basket of six eggs she'd gotten from their twenty chickens, and letting a smile tug at her lips, she headed back inside and off the covered porch.

Chickens! When would she have ever thought that a city girl like her might be raising chickens while they lived in Connecticut?

Inside, the woodstove already heated the main rooms of the house enough that Cora discarded her shawl onto the coatrack and took her basket straight into the kitchen. Their house in Kansas City was much smaller than the one they'd had in Norwalk. The cozy cottage was little more than a large, shared room and two bedrooms—one for her and one for her father. The wooden construction allowed for more drafts than the brick home she'd been accustomed to. She missed her neighborhood and her friends and even the few classes she'd been

taking at the college. Regardless, she thanked the Lord for what they had. Her nineteenth year had been much more than an adventure, though she'd never have known what would befall her a year ago at this time. Her birthday was just last week, and now Christmas was just around the corner. The same last two events she'd had with her mother. Cora's heart tightened in her chest, and her eyes stung. She'd taken her mother for granted. Last year, her mother had crocheted her a pair of gloves, and Cora hadn't thanked her. She had even complained that they weren't store-bought kid gloves like Elenore Curtain from down the lane had. Little did Cora know that she would come to regret those thoughts, those words spoken so off-handedly, when her mother would be gone the day after Christmas.

Swiping at her eyes, Cora shook herself free from those thoughts. If she dwelled on them now, she wouldn't be able to do much more than sit at their kitchen table and cry. Her father's bank was nearly ready to open, and the last thing she needed to do was cause him to be late when he needed to supervise the builders. A sigh escaped her lips as she closed the text book on the table and took hold of the cast-iron pan and placed it on the burner. Bacon and eggs were a staple for her father since they'd arrived in Kansas City, since both were in plentiful supply.

"Is that breakfast I smell?" Her father asked as he stepped into the kitchen a short while later. His salt and pepper beard was combed and nearly as well coiffed as the hair atop his head. His pressed suit had creases in all the right places and in no other. There was hardly a time that Cora could remember her father even having so much as a wrinkle or hair out of place, except that fateful day after Christmas the year before when he'd told her that Mother had been in an accident. That had been the only time that she could remember him ever looking disheveled.

"It'll be ready in just a moment," Cora said as she slid the sunny side up eggs on the plate alongside her father's toast. Once the plate was ready, she took it to the table and set it at her father's elbow, returning her father's smile.

This was the time of morning back in Norwalk that he would read the paper that had been delivered so readily upon their doorstep, but Kansas City had no such luxury yet. Perhaps someday soon they would, but for now, the only place to get a copy of the Kansas City

Star was at the general store. Once her father began to tuck in, Cora returned to the stove to make her own eggs.

“This will likely be the last week of construction before we open the bank. It would be fortuitous if we can open before the holiday. And I think we will. The workers are putting the finishing touches on the interior and installing the vault that’s been shipped from back east, much to the chagrin of the local metal workers. But the board of supervisors from the bank were insistent upon getting the same brand of safe that has the combination lock designed by Mr. Linus Yale. It’s the only acceptable kind. I try to explain that to the locals, but it seems as though my words fall upon deaf ears. Just as well...”

Cora did little more than smile and nod as her father went on. Now that she was the only ear that he could bend in the mornings, and there was no newspaper between them, she’d become her father’s captive audience. She didn’t mind. Though her father had a penchant for rambling, most of it was significant and interesting. Though at times it could be repetitive. He ate bites of food between words, and often sips of coffee punctuated sentences. But this was what was most comfortable to Cora, and to her mother when she had been there. As long as father kept talking to them, they knew that everything was all right. If father ever stopped talking and kept to himself, both of them knew that meant that something was wrong. That morning, though, the gentle tinkle of sleet and snow against the glass of their front window distracted her from both the food and the conversation. Her eyes couldn’t help but wander in that direction.

“Christmas will be here soon. Have you given any thought to what you might like?” her father asked.

Cora blinked, shaking herself from the spell the snow had upon her. “What?”

“I know that things might be a bit harder to come by out here compared to Norwalk, but I’m sure we can get you something nice and worth having.”

She shook her head again, scrunching her brow. “Oh, Father. I don’t need anything at all for Christmas this year. You’ll be much too busy with the new bank and getting it started. The last thing you need to worry about is something silly, like a gift for your daughter.”

“Nonsense,” her father quipped. “You have been more than a daughter to me the past year. Traveling companion, cooking, cleaning,

and doing all that you could to make this cabin a home. Getting you a gift would be something worthwhile. If you don't choose something, it will only make me pick something for you, and you may not like what I decide upon."

With a sigh, Cora gave her father a soft smile. "I can't think of anything that I want more than just to have the holiday evening with you and to eat a fine meal. I have need of nothing else I can imagine. If you choose something else, I'm sure I will love it."

Her father's eyes grew a bit sad around the edges. He swallowed once, looking like he might shed a tear, but nodded and looked back down at his plate quietly.

Cora hadn't meant to make her father emotional but had just spoken her heart. And now that he'd grown quiet, a part of her wished that she could think of some superficial thing to ask for that would make him happy. A year ago, she'd have had no trouble thinking of exactly what she might want for a gift. How times had changed.

A knock sounded at the door, causing Cora's heart to jump a little in her chest. It wasn't that she was surprised, just unready. Without even thinking, she pushed her chair back and leapt to her feet. "If you'll excuse me, I'll get it."

Her father's eyes crinkled at the sides with a small smile as he nodded toward her and finished the last bite upon his plate.

With a deep breath, she quickly untied her apron and removed it, setting it upon her chair as she pushed it back in. The last time she'd answered the door with her apron on, Jonas had given her a good ribbing about it. Her cheeks flushed at the thought. It wasn't so much that she minded his teasing as much as she hated her body's response to it. She didn't want him to know just how much of an effect on her he had. The girls back home had often said that the first in a couple to fall in love was the one to lose most in a relationship. So, with a swallow at the lump in her throat, Cora pushed down her feelings for the man on the porch before turning the knob and opening the door.

Her heart skipped a beat when Jonas's hazel eyes met hers. For a long moment, they both just stared at each other. Everything froze as she took in how his sandy-brown hair fell over his forehead, how disappearing snowflakes dotted his dark coat's shoulders, how he bent over slightly as he greeted her so that he didn't seem so tall. Her lungs burned before she realized she'd been holding her breath. "Oh!" She

shook herself from the moment's grip on her. "Won't you come in."

Half of his lip ticked up in a teasing smile. "I thought for a moment you were going to leave me out in the cold."

She hated the way her cheeks heated. "Of course not," she said in an angrier tone than she'd meant to. "I was just surprised by the snow."

Jonas nodded and came in, placing his brown hat on the hook by the door. "Yes, it's only a bit of flurries now, but it was sleeting a bit when I first started out. To the east, the sun is shining past the clouds though—I don't think it will snow for long."

"That's too bad," Cora said barely above a whisper. Longingly, she chanced one last glance outside before closing the door, letting the cool morning air pull the heat from her face before she turned around. "Have you had breakfast? I still have some bacon and toast."

He bowed again toward her. "Thank you for the offer. I'd take you up on it this morning, but it's nearly eight, and I know your father wanted to get an early start."

Father's fork clattered against his plate, and his chair scraped against the hardwood floor. He grabbed his pocket watch from his vest pocket. "It's that late already!"

Urgency gripped Cora as she had a sudden realization. "Wait! I need to go to the general store this morning, but I'm not ready. Will you wait for me, Father?"

Her father's eyes softened as his lips drew into a thin line behind his beard. "I'm afraid that I cannot." Then he looked toward Jonas. "Would you mind staying here until she's ready and then escort her to the store? I'll see you at the bank site after she returns home?"

"Of course I wouldn't mind," said Jonas as he began to unbutton his coat. "Perhaps I'll take you up on that offer of breakfast, as well?"

She swallowed hard at the way his brow lifted. "Oh, of course! And I'll make some eggs, too, if we have the time?"

Both of them looked toward her father, who nodded as he grabbed his own hat at the door. "Of course. Take your time."

And with another momentary blast of cold air, her father was gone. As Jonas sat down at the table and offered her another half-smile, she asked, "How would you like your eggs this morning?"



Jonas was always pleasant company, and Cora had walked by his side more times than she could count, but still her heart quickened in her chest whenever she was next to him. They'd known each other for five years, since he'd begun working as her father's assistant. Little more than six years separated their ages, but his frequent playful banter and teasing smile made her believe that he still only thought of her as that same fourteen-year-old child who had awkwardly tripped down the steps upon their first meeting.

He squinted up at the sky and let the sunlight fall upon his face. "It's turning out to be a lovely day. The snow has all but melted already."

It was a bittersweet feeling for Cora. As much as she was glad it had warmed up enough to allow her to walk with Jonas to the general store, her heart still longed for a good snow to cover the ground. When she was younger, she felt that the snow covering the ground seemed to usher the holiday closer—faster. And even though she knew that time neither slowed nor sped for any such reason as that, she couldn't help but feel in her heart that there might be some truth to it. "It's a little bit sad," she said, finally.

A small, gentle smile spread across Jonas's face. "Are you looking forward to the upcoming holiday? I know that it will be the first without your mother, but I hope that the days still bring you excitement and joy."

She nodded, still filled with that bittersweet emotion. "I will miss mother terribly, but I've decided to do the best I can to make a meal for you and for father that will remind him of all the good times that we had over the years. I want it to be no less perfect than the ones we had in Connecticut. Unfortunately, there won't be my mother's notorious cranberry cake."

"Why not?"

Cora huffed a laugh. "We're not in Connecticut anymore... I've not

seen hide nor hair of a cranberry around here.”

“Perhaps they could order them at the general store?”

“I doubt it.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to ask.”

A small sigh escaped her, but she nodded. “I will ask.”

They turned the corner and found a young girl staring at something in the road from a distance. Once they drew closer, Cora couldn’t help but find herself searching for whatever might have grasped the child’s attention. A silver coin stood on its side, awkwardly in the street. It was an oddity.

Cora knelt down beside the child. “Will you not pick the coin up?”

The frown upon the child’s lips deepened. “I can’t do that. It would be bad luck.”

Cora peeked up at Jonas whose eyebrow lifted at such a statement. With a glance back at the child, Cora asked, “What if we blow on the coin and get it to lie down flat again? Would that take away its bad luck?”

The girl’s eyes widened as she shook her head. “No. You can’t take away the curse on something like that. It needs to fall down on its own. Or with an actual wind blowing or something like that.”

“So, stomping your foot next to it wouldn’t do?” Cora frowned. Although she didn’t ever think of herself as superstitious, she couldn’t help but humor the child as the girl seemed distraught over the situation.

“Absolutely not.” The girl’s hands fisted at her side as she straightened.

Now Cora truly understood the conundrum the young girl had been going through. She wanted the coin but waited for an act of God to allow her to pick up the nickel. Slowly, Cora straightened back up again. She was invested now in the problem before her and felt as though she couldn’t continue on to town until the solution had been found. A small sigh escaped her lips as she tried to think of a way to help the child.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” grumbled Jonas who then reached down and picked up the offending coin and offered it to the child with outstretched hand.

A gasp came from the child whose eyes widened even further, and she backed away, shaking her head. Tears filled the bottom of her

eyes as she turned tail and ran in the opposite direction, leaving Jonas standing there with the nickel between his fingers.

Wrinkles appeared in Jonas's brow as he watched the child running away. "She was taking this superstition thing a little too seriously, don't you think?" He asked.

Cora's own chest had tightened the moment Jonas had picked up the coin, too. It was a natural reaction and one she was not proud of and wished she didn't have when Jonas's eyes lighted upon her face and more confusion mixed into his expression.

"Surely you aren't giving credence to the child's whimsy?"

A forced laugh that came out as a huff escaped Cora's lips. "Of course not."

Relief relaxed his features as he palmed the coin. "That's good to hear. As God-fearing Christians, we cannot put stock in an item like this as having control over our futures. No matter what position it is in, it's just a coin. And we know whose hands hold our futures, right?"

The tightness in Cora's chest loosened at his words. He was right and childish superstitions could definitely not take away from the will of God. She nodded and offered a more genuine laugh this time. "Of course."

"I guess if I see the child again, I'll owe her one nickel," he said as he put the coin in his pants pocket. "Perhaps I'll offer her a different one since she seemed so offended by this one in particular."

Slowly they both started walking again in the direction of town. "Perhaps that would be best."

Somehow, she doubted very seriously that the child would take any nickel from Jonas's hand any time soon. Those kinds of feelings of superstition could leave a lasting impression on one so young. She hoped that they might see the child again soon, but also wished that Jonas had taken a better tact with the child. It might have gone better if he'd convinced her that God-fearing Christians had no need to fear the stance of a coin before picking it up in a manner which could frighten the girl. Honestly, though, Cora doubted that the child would have been convinced that the coin had no effect upon her luck. And when Cora thought about the strange way the coin had been standing on its side, she could understand the girl's hesitation.

"Here we are," Jonas said in his quiet, gentle voice. "Do you need

me to escort you back to the house afterwards?"

The walk had gone by so much quicker than Cora had hoped while her thoughts had been elsewhere. She shook her head. "Not at all. I should be able to make my way home on my own. Thank you for escorting me here."

"My pleasure," he said as he doffed his hat and bowed slightly.

Cora watched him make his leave down the busy, late-morning Kansas City street. Horses walked and carriages made their way down the street slowly as to allow men like Jonas to weave their way through the crowd to the other side without fear of being run down. Cora kept eye on him until he was completely out of sight. Then, after letting out a long, slow breath, she turned about and entered the general store.

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LIFE IN A CABIN wasn't something Cora was sure she'd get used to so quickly. She'd surprised herself. It was just a matter of numbering her chores and following a specific schedule each day. Feed and care for the chickens. Draw water from the well. Keep wood burning in the stove. Stay ahead of the dust and dirt that seemed to cover everything much more quickly than it ever did when they were in Connecticut. Growing up, Cora had always helped her mother with the chores. Her mother had insisted that Cora learn how to keep a house even though Cora had resisted. Little did either of them know that she would need to use those skills so soon to take care of herself and her father in her mother's stead.

Much of her day was spent in keeping the house warm and clean for her father's sake. Perhaps it would have been easier in their old house in Norwalk where she would have had more amenities at her disposal, but then she would have had to endure the prying eyes of her friends there who nary had to lift a finger more than to play the piano or learn to crochet. Most in her neighborhood had had servants and maids to do the cleaning and cooking. Not in the Sullivan household, though. Even though her father was one of the top men at the most prestigious bank in town, his wife was set on doing everything herself and teaching her daughter to do the same. Though Cora'd hated it at the time, she was thankful for her mother's ways

now.

She squinted at the fading light in the house and realized that she needed to go ahead and light the oil lamps before she'd be plunged in complete darkness. The days were getting shorter quickly, and it was her responsibility to make sure the house was well-lit and food ready for her father's return. The clock on the shelf in their sitting area bonged once, denoting the hour. Casting a glance its direction, she was surprised to see the hands already standing at six o'clock. Her father generally made it home before dark, and with the fading light, Cora hadn't been surprised to not have seen him yet, but it was more than half an hour past the time she would have expected him home.

Shaking her head, Cora chided herself. Being a half-hour late wasn't much. He might have run into the mayor or some other gentleman in town who kept him talking instead of making it home. Still, pain gripped Cora's heart. It was irrational, but she knew why. Her father was as timely as a watch himself. Never was he late. The only day in recent memory could Cora recall where her father had been so late was that fateful day after Christmas where his tardiness had been more than justified.

Even as she'd tried to remain busy with the pot roast in the Dutch oven, adding a bit of water to it to keep it from burning, her eyes were drawn to the clock every five minutes. After another half-hour had passed, she collapsed into her seat with tears stinging in her eyes. Was he going to come home? Was it possible that some stranger, or the sheriff, or a deputy, or someone else would come to the door and inform her that it had been her father in an accident this time? The pain in her chest increased and a sob came up to her throat unbidden. It blocked her air passage, making it impossible to breathe for a moment until she could swallow it back down. Still, the tears spilled over her cheeks as she wrung her hands.

The clock bonged again, letting her know that it had reached seven.

And the panic began to rise within her.

She leapt to her feet and rushed to the stove, turning off the simmering burner. The faintest smell of burning came from the Dutch oven, and she wasn't sure the roast was even going to be edible any longer. It didn't matter. The rocks in Cora's stomach filled her enough that she wasn't sure she would be able to consume one bite if it were

forced upon her. She needed to find her father. Rushing to the door, she pulled her coat from the rack and and shoved her arms through the sleeves. Sleet and snow had begun pelting the window again. She blinked at it. When had it started to snow again? She hadn't noticed it —hadn't smelled it at all this time.

Shaking her head, she buttoned her coat and grabbed a hat from the hook next to the door and flung it open. A strong wind blew against her as she stared out into the darkness of the night. Quickly she turned about and grabbed hold of the lantern by the door. The weather, which she'd always considered her friend became her enemy as the wind slapped against her cheeks and bit her nose. Unbearable cold enveloped her and chilled her to the bone. She felt as though she weren't even wearing a coat. Turning about, she closed the door behind her, pulling it against the wind, when suddenly, she heard her name.

"Cora!" her father called from the darkness, "What are you doing out here in the cold? It's freezing. Get back inside."

Her heart leapt into her throat as she spun on her heel toward the sound of his voice. "Father?" she cried out into the darkness. "Is it really you?"

"Who else would it be?" he asked as he stepped into the light that was cast from the house and the lantern in her hand. The wind had blown his hair in all directions, but the haggard look in his eyes was much too familiar.

And like that, Cora's heart dropped again. "What's happened? What is wrong?"

Her father's forehead creased as he shook his head. "Let's get inside. You'll catch your death of cold out here, and I've been in it quite long enough myself."

Cora couldn't help but study his face, as he stepped past her and reached for the door. "Did something happen at the bank?"

"Inside, Cora." Her father opened the door and gently placed a hand upon her shoulder, pushing slightly to encourage her to enter before him.

She allowed him to guide her inside, but then immediately turned about as he pulled the door shut. A realization hit her. The reason he'd been so disheveled the day her mother had passed and the unkempt look he had now was because something was missing.

“Where is your hat?”

Blinking, Father shook his head. “I... I must have left it at the office... or maybe at the sheriff’s office.”

Her eyes widened of their own accord. “The sheriff?”

Slowly he nodded, meeting her eyes with his own, softened ones. “I’m afraid Jonas has been arrested.”



That sinking feeling returned to Cora as her stomach twisted over the rocks that had been there when her father had been late. “Arrested?” She shook her head. “Surely there has been some sort of mistake?”

A haggard look had taken over her father’s countenance, and his body bent over as though his shoulders had become too heavy, and it seemed he’d aged ten years over the period of a day. He shook his head. “There’s been no mistake.”

Panic gripped her. “What do you mean? How could there not have been a mistake? Arrested? Whatever could they have arrested Jonas for?”

With a sigh, her father sat at the table and put his face in his hands. After scrubbing at his beard, he lifted his eyes and said, “Cora, I’m starving. Let’s eat dinner, please.”

The directness of her father’s order got her moving. “Of course,” she said quickly.

Moving into the kitchen, she lifted the cover of the Dutch oven and surveyed the roast she’d been making. The gravy around the edges had dried, but the meat itself had remained moist because of the water that she’d remembered to add. The potatoes and carrots around it were darkened, overcooked, and falling apart as she dished them out upon the plates. The fresh bread she’d gotten from the local bakery was the prettiest thing upon the plate as she set the dish in front of her father. She set her plate across from him but continued to stand and look at him expectantly.

Without looking up, her father began to tuck in, in silence.

Cora swallowed hard. Silence. Her father usually complimented her cooking. With a dish looking as this one did, Cora hadn’t expected compliments, but did expect some sort of reaction. Instead, she was greeted with no response at all. Folding her hands together, she walked around the table and took her seat across from her father. Her

appetite hadn't returned, and the burnt food upon the table did nothing to stimulate it. She watched her father eat without looking up, without saying a word, and wondered how he could even consume this food that hardly looked edible.

He lifted his cup and found it empty and finally looked in Cora's direction. "Water?" he asked.

Nodding and getting up from her chair, she grabbed the pitcher from off the counter and topped off her father's cup. Again, he said nothing and tore off another piece of bread to wipe the gravy which was the only thing that yet remained upon his plate. Slowly, Cora returned to her seat and watched as her father finished every last bite. Then he finally looked up and said, "It was a little bit salty, but very good, Cora."

She blinked at him. "It was burnt."

His left eye twitched. "Was it? I hadn't noticed."

"Father, why was Jonas arrested?" Her voice cracked when she spoke.

After letting out a long sigh, her father leaned back in his chair and met eyes with her. "He stole from the bank."

Cora straightened in her chair and blinked at her father several times. "Stole? From the bank?"

Shaking his head, her father continued, "I found it hard to believe, myself, but there was a witness... two witnesses, in fact. And Jonas had nothing to say that could prove them wrong."

Her hands fisted in her lap. She shook her head as her heart squeezed in her chest. "Jonas is not a thief."

That softness returned to her father's eyes as he leaned forward. "I didn't believe it at first, either, Cora. I've trusted that man with my business for over five years now... nearly six. But it seems to be true."

"I refuse to believe it," Cora said, standing quickly. "I'll go talk to him. There has to be some mistake."

Her father's voice deepened as he ordered her, "Sit back down."

Blinking again, Cora did as her father commanded.

"Cora, child." He sighed. "It's late and there's a storm outside. I want to forbid you from going to the jailhouse and speaking to Jonas at all, as I don't think there's been any kind of mistake here. But I know that it would be useless to refuse you. However, I must insist that you wait until morning. Understand? I will escort you there

myself, all right?”

Suddenly feeling tired, Cora glanced at the mantle clock on the shelf just as it bonged again. Eight o'clock. How could a few short hours have turned her world and everything she was so sure about upside down? Jonas—a thief? She still couldn't believe it to be true. Her father's chair scraped against the hardwood floor as he stood again, looking exhausted, but expectantly at her.

She nodded her assent. “Yes, Father. I will wait until morning.”

It was the last thing she wanted to do. How could she sleep in her warm bed while Jonas lay in a cold jailhouse cell? Tears stung the back of her eyes, making the room about her go blurry. At least the fear that had seized her earlier about her father's safety had been assuaged. Breathing deeply, she swiped at her eyes and bowed her head. Earnestly she prayed her thanks for her father's return and asked the Lord for help in the situation for Jonas. Whatever had happened at the bank, she couldn't see that Jonas had a part in thievery. He was an honest and upright man. They'd known him for much too long to believe that he'd change in such a way. She prayed that he would be warm and well-cared for in the jailhouse, and that he'd be safe when she arrived.

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“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” Jonas's voice was harsh and raspy and barely had the same timbre it usually did.

The sound of it made Cora's heart race. She had convinced Father to let her visit Jonas alone, though it had taken some doing. Luckily, Jonas was the only prisoner in the jailhouse, otherwise, it would have been impossible. Presently, Jonas sat in the shadows of the jail cell, behind a set of iron bars, and she could hardly see his shape, much less his face. She swallowed hard. Barely able to get the words out past the lump in her throat, she said, “I'm here to help. I know you didn't do what they say you did.”

Jonas scoffed. “Then you're the only one who believes differently. The witnesses are so convincing they've nearly got me believing I did it, even though I don't remember doing it.”

Sadness rang a note in his tone, and it gave her courage enough to step forward and place a gloved hand on one of the bars. “You can't

believe everything you hear. I know you didn't do this, and I'll prove it... somehow."

In the shadows beyond the bars, Jonas stood from where he'd been sitting and made a wince of pain. Then he slowly walked into the light and revealed his bruised and swollen face. His split lower lip oozed blood. A gasp escaped her. He nodded, his one hazel eye that wasn't swollen shut meeting hers. "I know I must look like the monster that everyone says I am, but I truly can't believe I did this."

Closing her eyes, Cora steeled herself with a deep breath. Then she opened her eyes and refused to let her emotions get the better of her. "Tell me what happened. Let me hear your side of this."

Jonas stared at her with his one good eye. "What could you possibly do for me? You're barely nineteen."

"I'm not a child anymore, Jonas, and you know that I studied law in Connecticut and was ready to work as an aide to Mr. Gibson," she said with more conviction than she felt.

He huffed again, his bottom lip splitting more as the corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. He winced and touched his lip. Then he shook his head. "I don't remember what happened exactly. I was escorting the bank's first deposit from the Pinkerton stagecoach that had delivered it from Connecticut. Five thousand dollars in bills... There was that Pinkerton agent with me, Duke Carrington, I think was his name. We were walking, and then... I don't remember. But when I came to, I was in the state I'm in now. The Pinkerton agent was shot and is at the doctors. As good as dead, they said. I was holding the gun in my hand... my gun, and the sheriff's deputy said that I'd run down the alley and had fallen and hit my head. But I... I don't remember any of that."

The hairs on Cora's arms stood on end. "They are saying you shot the Pinkerton agent, too?"

"If he dies, Cora..." a tear welled in his eye "... they'll try me for murder, as well."

Cora lowered her head and tried to think. "Who are the witnesses? Maybe I could talk to them."

With a tilt of his head, Jonas asked, "What good would that do?"

Pulling her hand from the iron bar, Cora fisted it. "I'm trusting you, Jonas," she said with force. "And I'm asking you to trust me, too. I'm not a fourteen-year-old girl who can't do anything of value. Let me

see what I can do, all right?"

A small smile lifted the side of his lip again, but Jonas stopped it before it split his cut once more. He nodded. "I trust you, Cora. More than just about anyone."

Her heart fluttered in her chest, and heat rushed to her cheeks. She nodded once and stepped back, putting some distance between them and hoping that Jonas couldn't see how flustered she'd become.

"The deputy who arrived at the sound of gunfire is one of the witnesses, and the other is a gentleman named Clint Bolling. He's the one who witnessed the robbery." Jonas looked both sad and tired. "Can you talk to the lawyer in town, as well? Your father offered to do so last night but the gentleman hasn't come to see me yet. I suppose I'm going to need some help there, too."

Taking another step back, Cora said, "I'll see what I can do and come back tomorrow to let you know what I find. You should get some rest."

"Thank you, Cora. You've been a huge help for me."

"You've always been a help to me and my family, even through all the troubles we've had over the past year. I refuse to abandon you in your time of need."

He huffed as he stepped backward, toward the shadows and the pallet in the corner of the cell. "That's exactly what your father said."

Cora's breath caught and her heart warmed. Of course, her father wouldn't abandon Jonas either. Her hands fisted at her sides as she turned about. Her father had tried to convince her of Jonas's guilt all the while not believing it himself. This was why he was nearly two hours late for dinner. Just how much did her father do before coming home? She needed to see him first before she did anything else.



The bank was a very short walk from the jailhouse and sheriff's office. Though her father had walked her there, Cora had insisted on seeing Jonas alone so that her father could get to work. He'd needed to send a telegram back to the main branch in Connecticut to apprise them of the situation and possibly get them to send more funds. When she stepped up to the building, she could hear the sounds of the construction that was going on inside. Even though the construction had been going on for a long while, it had been more than a month since Cora had visited her father at the building site. She marveled at the brick structure that looked more at home for her than any of the other buildings in town. Then she took a deep breath and opened the door.

Immediately, the hammering and sawing sounds grew louder. The smell of new carpeting and wallpapering glue hit her nose and intermingled with the scents of fresh wood and sawdust. She felt at home right away. The interior of the bank mirrored that of the bank in Connecticut almost perfectly. Even the red wingback chairs in the lobby were identical to the ones back home. She stepped forward, pulling off a glove, and ran her fingers across the top of the upholstery. Until she walked into the building, she hadn't realized just how much she'd missed being at home in Norwalk.

When she spotted her father, Cora released a sigh, returned her glove and continued forward straight toward him. He glanced up at her with a very serious expression, nodded and gestured for her to stay back. Cora nodded in return and then stood far back from where the carpenters were building. Although her father was of a liberal mind, giving Cora the opportunities for independence and even allowing her study at the women's college back in Connecticut, he still kept her at arms length when it came to being around the workers at the bank. He had told her that he didn't want her to get dirty in any way or to intermingle with those who worked so hard with their

hands. After her father finished his conversation with the carpenter who Cora imagined was the head since he held papers in his hands instead of a saw, Father made his way toward her. "What did Jonas have to say for himself? Are you convinced of his guilt?"

Frowning, Cora shook her head. "Absolutely not. I believe Jonas is innocent, no matter what the witnesses have said."

The tension in her father's face and shoulders relaxed just a bit, and a small smile spread through his lips and into his beard. "Though I'm happy to hear you are willing to support Jonas in his time of need, I must remain as impartial as possible. I am head of this bank, and it has been robbed. The board of supervisors in Connecticut are going to have quite the fit if they hear that I am supporting the very man accused of robbing them. So we must be discreet and show our support quietly, do you understand?"

Cora nodded. "I understand."

"Good," he said with a sigh. "Though I met with the lawyer initially yesterday, I want you to see him today. Make sure that he visits with Jonas and give aid in whatever way that you can. Use those things you learned during your studies to Jonas's advantage now."

"Of course, Father." Cora's heart squeezed in her chest.

"The lawyer's name is Mr. Henry Holt." Father glanced at his pocket watch. "I made an appointment to see him at eleven which is in approximately half an hour. I want you to see him in my stead. Do what he says and don't allow yourself to do anything untoward, understood. You are to remain with the lawyer if you are going to question the witnesses. I don't want you doing anything remotely dangerous on your own. Do you hear me?"

She nodded again. "Yes, Father."

"Okay," he said, looking even more relieved than she'd seen him since this whole thing had begun. "Then off you go. You don't want to be late for that meeting."

"Yes, Father," she called out as she turned on her heel and sped for the door.

The wind had picked up outside and the flurries that had been falling earlier had become a genuine snowfall. That was another thing about Kansas City compared to back home in Connecticut. The wind here seemed a bit harsher, like it was less friendly. Across the street, the men in front of the telegraph office were hanging bows of holly,

and in the storefront of the dressmaker, a Christmas tree stood with large glass bulbs. Cora blinked. In what had happened over the last day or so, she'd nearly forgotten that the holidays would be on them quickly. She shook her head. This wasn't a time for superficial frivolity. She had greater things to think about, and she needed to rely upon the true meaning of Christmas in a time like this. She took a deep breath, sent up a prayer and then stepped forward. Only to stop immediately. She frowned. Where exactly was Mr. Holt's law office? Chiding herself for not thinking before she moved, she headed back inside the bank to ask her father.

WHILE SHE SAT in the sitting area outside the law office of Mr. Holt, Cora's stomach growled. At breakfast that morning, she'd not had much of an appetite and had barely nibbled at her meal. Now that it was nearly time for luncheon, she found herself fully ready to eat. But then her mind went back to Jonas sitting in that cell. She wondered what kind of food the jailhouse would provide for him there. Her jaw tightened. It didn't matter. She wouldn't let him subsist on meager rations. That wouldn't do for the man she loved.

Her heart leapt in her chest. Loved? Did she really love Jonas? Even though she'd never used that word before in speech or thought about Jonas, she knew it was true. What might have started as a schoolgirl crush had definitely become love, unrequited, at least. She let out a breath. Maybe it would stay that way... but maybe it wouldn't. Gooseflesh rose upon her arms at the thought. She shook her head. This wasn't the time to be thinking on such matters. She needed to concentrate and speak with Mr. Holt in her father's stead—on Jonas's behalf even. It was imperative that she kept her head at a time like this.

Cigar smoke and cloves were the scents that were strongest in the sitting area of the lawyer's office. The wingback chairs here were wider and not quite as tall as the ones in the bank, but every bit as luxuriously upholstered, though the fabric was more of a beige than red. Books lined the shelves behind the desk of the secretary who'd had yet to return since telling Cora that she would inform Mr. Holt of her arrival nearly a half an hour before.

Cora slipped her own pocket watch out of the small hidden pocket in the hem of her skirt. It was nearly a quarter past eleven. Mr. Holt was late. Perhaps it was best that she'd been sent to speak with the man, since her father would never have approved of this tardiness. The door behind the large oak secretary's desk opened with a click and the smiling receptionist came out. "Mr. Holt will see you now, Miss Sullivan."

After Cora's stomach flipped, she fisted her hands. She needed to steel herself. If she'd been a scared little girl when she'd first talked to Mr. Gibson back in Connecticut, she'd have never convinced him to give her a chance at becoming his aide. Then she wouldn't have been able to study the law or get a recommendation to go to the women's college in Norwalk. This gentleman couldn't possibly be more intimidating than the District Attorney back home. Thinking that way helped her stand straighter and walk with more purpose, but it did little to settle the butterflies that had made their way to her stomach.

Regardless, she strode forward and followed the receptionist into the main office of Mr. Holt. The man behind the desk stood as she entered. He was a round man, shorter than Cora had imagined. His cheeks were ruddy above a well-trimmed white beard. The top of his head had nary a hair except at the temples, where a small smattering of red peppered in with the white there. "Ho, Miss Sullivan," he called in a jovial manner, "It's lovely to meet you, though the circumstances are rather unfortunate."

The gentleman gestured toward one of the chairs on the opposite side of his large oak desk, a twin to that which was out in his sitting area. As she sat, he sat with her, the smile on his lips never leaving his face.

"Thank you for meeting with me," she said.

"Not at all. Your father said that you have some experience with the law yourself, that you were studying to be a lawyer at the women's college in Connecticut?"

Her face flushed. "Not quite a lawyer, but an aide, sir. They don't have accreditation for women to become lawyers in Connecticut yet."

He waved a hand in front of his face. "Hodge-podge. Arabella Hall is a lawyer friend of mine from Iowa who was admitted to the bar. Other states will soon follow. It's only a matter of time. Women are every bit as smart, if not smarter than men... just ask my mother. And

they can argue better than most men as well... just ask my wife."

Cora blinked at him, unsure how to respond to the man's joking. After meeting eyes with him a long moment, he began to laugh, making it comfortable for her to laugh with him. Somehow his cheerful energy was contagious. With a smile she offered, "Perhaps they are not as liberal in Connecticut as they like to think that they are."

"That much is for certain," he said with a nod. "It's lucky for you that you're here in Kansas City. The Wild West, as it's often called, is like a new world. And as such, it has fewer rules and regulations against things such as whether a woman can be a lawyer, a teacher, or even a doctor! Perhaps you should consider continuing your studies here. There is more than one way to become a lawyer, you know, young lady. You've already concluded two semesters of study from what I've heard from your father. Maybe it's time for you to apprentice under another lawyer and get your foot into the door."

Heat rose to her cheeks, and she gaped at the man sitting across from her. "Is that an offer?"

He shrugged. "Perhaps. Let us see how we work together on this case and if we believe we'll get along."

"Of course." She blinked hard and shook her head. The last thing she'd expected was to get an offer like this in Kansas City at all, much less from the very lawyer she was having a meeting with. This gentleman who looked very much like Saint Nicholas was giving her a real gift. But was the timing right? Wouldn't her father need her to keep house as she'd been doing? At least this situation with Jonas would need to be resolved before they even considered moving forward on an apprenticeship. She swallowed the lump in her throat. Even in Connecticut, she'd not dared to dream something as big as becoming a lawyer, herself. She'd settled on the idea of becoming an aide instead.

"I know it's a lot to consider," the man said from across from her. "So keep it out of your mind for now. Let's just concentrate on the case ahead of us. Go ahead and tell me about this Mr. Jonas Cross. I mean all that you know about him from the moment that you both met. And then once I get a feel for the man, we'll head over to the jailhouse and meet with him."

Before Cora could answer in the affirmative, her stomach growled

audibly. Her cheeks heated as she wrapped her arms around her stomach.

After chuckling, Mr. Holt stood. "I'm quite famished myself. Why don't we head into the house at the back of the office. Mrs. Holt will be happy to make us both a little something for lunch. Likely she'll insist on making something for the gentleman in the jail cell, as well."

Standing herself, Cora couldn't help but gape again. Not only did Mr. Holt seem to be able to read her mind, but he was fulfilling her needs before she could even express them. So far she was liking this gentleman very much. "I wouldn't want to impose."

"Nonsense," he said with a wave of his hand as he came around his large desk. "Mrs. Holt would love to have someone else to talk to besides myself. She works so hard she gets quite lonely, too."

When they stepped into the outer sitting room, the receptionist stood with a smile. Mr. Holt gestured amicably toward the woman. "Miss Sullivan, please meet my wife, Mrs. Millicent Holt."



After a pleasant lunch with the Holts, Mr. Holt and Clara visited Jonas in the jailhouse, bringing him the sandwiches that Mrs. Holt had made. Jonas told the lawyer all the same things that he'd said to Clara when she'd visited earlier. Even though she'd told Mr. Holt many of the same things, Mr. Holt listened attentively and let Jonas continue his story without interruption. The respect that Cora had for the lawyer was growing with each moment that they spent together. As they were leaving the jailhouse, Mr. Holt turned toward her. "I'll walk you home if you like?"

Cora shook her head. "It's not necessary. I'm quite used to making the trek back on my own."

He smiled wider and offered his elbow. "I'm sure an independent woman such as yourself is accustomed to it, but humor an old man set in his ways and allow me to walk you at least most of the journey."

With a nod, she took his elbow and they walked along. Again Mr. Holt asked about Cora's experiences with Jonas and what kind of man he was, and Cora slipped into an old story. "I was quite surprised, because I didn't even know that Jonas was there. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the gentleman... if he could be called that... in question said something off-handedly to me and before I could even get offended. Jonas stepped in between us and demanded an apology from the brute. That's the kind of man he is. He'd never let anyone belittle a woman or make a harsh remark without stepping in."

Mr. Holt's smile grew. "Are you certain he is that way with all women or with you in particular?"

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and her heart skipped a beat. "Certainly, it's all women. There would be no reason for Jonas to show me any kind of special attention."

"No reason? Are you sure?"

She blinked and shook her head. "Jonas is practically a member of

our household—family—and he’s known me since I was only fourteen. I’m sure he still sees me as that same little girl.”

With a shrug, Mr. Holt said. “Perhaps, perhaps not. Time will tell, I’m sure. Regardless, you have feelings for him, correct?”

She didn’t think it was possible for her cheeks to get any hotter, and yet they did. Gasping for air, she asked, “What do you mean?”

“It’s quite obvious. I’m sure that Mr. Cross also sees the stars in your eyes when you look upon him. No man could be so blind.”

Her heart sunk toward her stomach. “Then... if what you say is true, he’s not responded in kind. That just goes to prove that my feelings for him are unrequited to be sure.”

“Again, I wouldn’t be to certain of that, young lady. Just give him a bit more time before you decide to let your heart be broken.” Then the man gave a large sigh and looked toward the church they were passing. The sounds of choir and piano music filled the air and grew louder as they approached. The door to the building stood open, allowing the music to swell outward and for the two walking to peer inside. *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear* rung out. He turned toward her again. “Do you have a favorite Christmas song?”

Bittersweet memories of she and her mother singing in choir together in Norwalk filled her. Pain and pleasure intermingled in her chest. Tears stung the backs of her eyes as her heart squeezed. She nodded and swallowed down the lump in her throat. Even then, she could barely breathe the words, “*O Holy Night.*”

“That’s a lovely song. One of my personal favorites as well. Mrs. Holt and I weren’t blessed with children, but if we’d had a daughter, I would have loved to see her sing in a choir like that one and join Mrs. Holt in Christmas carols. Are you planning anything special for the holiday, dear?”

The bittersweet feeling she’d been having faded a bit with hearing about another person’s struggles. At least she’d had the time with her mother that she did. For that she would be eternally grateful. She let out a small breath of air and watched as it curled like smoke around her face. “I don’t have any great plans, just making a good dinner for my father and of course Jonas. If you and Mrs. Holt don’t have any plans, you should come as well.”

Mr. Holt turned toward her with a small smile, saying, “That’s very kind of you. But you don’t need to put yourself out on our account.”

She frowned and shook her head vigorously. "Not at all. It would be nothing to cook for you both. I make a great deal more food than necessary for the three of us anyway. And it would be an honor to have you both join us."

"Well, then, we'll accept," he said, but put a finger in the air, "after we get your dear friend, Mr. Cross out of this situation he is in presently."

Cora's heart lightened. "Yes, that would be the best Christmas present of all. And the meal would just be another way of expressing our gratitude. I only wish that I'd be able to make my mother's delicious Cranberry Cake at the end of the meal."

He tilted his head toward her. "Cranberry Cake? I don't think I've ever eaten that... or even heard of such a thing for that matter."

"It's a delicious soft cake with just the right amount of tartness due to the cranberries. One might even call it bittersweet. Only, I asked at the general store if they could get me any and Mr. Wilson declined. Apparently getting cranberries on this side of the Mississippi is neigh impossible."

A small shrug lifted his shoulders. "That's unfortunate, but let's not give up hope. Mrs. Holt makes a delicious Dutch apple pie, and we will be happy to bring it to dinner, anyway. And if by some miracle you are able to procure your cranberries, we'd love to partake of your mother's specialty as well."

The thought of Christmas and dinner and Cora's mother warmed her heart. That bitter feeling that took away from the sweetness of the memories due to the loss of her mother was gone momentarily. She loved the idea of being able to make her mother's recipes for this kind new friend that they had gained. It was a disappointment for her when she found that they had come upon her house. The sky had darkened around the edges, but still would hold daylight for a while longer though the sun had dipped just below the horizon.

"Well," Mr. Holt said. "Try to be at the office first thing in the morning so that we can meet with the deputy and see what he has to say as a witness. We'll depose him and find any flaws that we can in his statement."

"Will nine o'clock do, or should I try to be earlier?"

"Nine will be just fine. That is the time that our deputy will be checking into the office of the sheriff, and it will allow him a moment

to get settled before we arrive to get his statement for ourselves.”

The light had faded a bit by the time they’d made it to the fence that defined her front yard. She nodded toward Mr. Holt. “Thank you and I will see you in the morning.”

He had already started to turn away as he threw back a wave and a wide smile. Cora couldn’t help but feel comforted by the lawyer’s smile and attitude. She had felt unsure of herself and her abilities to help Jonas at all, although she believed him to be completely innocent. Now that she’d met with the Holts and saw how confident the lawyer was that they could turn this case around, it helped her feel assured too. A cool breeze lifted the flyaway hairs at the back of her neck. The sun had dipped below the horizon but the fading light still lingered enough for her to see her father passing Mr. Holt and stopping for a moment to talk to him up the lane.

Turning about, she quickly opened the gate. If her father took his time with talking to Mr. Holt, she’d have time to start the wood stove and get dinner preparing as well. With a lighter heart, she nearly ran toward the front door.

IT WAS a quarter to nine when Cora arrived at the Holt’s front door. She’d been up with the sunrise again, looking at the law books she’d brought with her from school in Connecticut, and reading as much as she could while she prepared breakfast for her father. Impatiently she’d waited for Father to finish his plate, cleaning up everything else before he’d even set down his fork. By the time her father was ready to head out the door, she was there with him, handing him his hat. Even though he eyed her in a way that seemed to ask what the hurry was, he’d only continued to talk about the bank and the ongoing there, never once mentioning what she might be doing in town or even Jonas’s case. It seemed that he’d meant it when he’d said that he needed to distance himself from the situation.

She hesitated on the doorstep of the office. Would Mr. Holt even be ready to receive her? He’d said to meet at nine, and here she was, early and eager. Her hands fisted and though her heart beat rapidly, she braved the last few steps forward and knocked.

Inside, she heard a sweet feminine voice call out, “Just a moment!”

And the sound of it calmed Cora's nerves. The door opened a moment later and Mrs. Holt pulled it wide. "Oh, good! It's always great to have a punctual client and helper. Glad to see you, dear. Please come in."

Cora stepped inside, and immediately, Mr. Holt rushed past, waving his hand toward her. "Have a seat, Miss Sullivan. I'll be ready to go in just a moment. Millicent, where is my good pen? I seem to have misplaced it."

Without even looking his direction or changing expression, she called over her shoulder. "It's right where you left it—beside your reading glasses in the library along with your book of notes." Then she took hold of Cora's hands as she closed the door behind her. "It's dreadfully cold out there; your cheeks are flushed. Would you like a spot of tea to warm you up?"

"That's a very kind offer, but I'm not sure we have the time," Cora said.

Mrs. Holt waved a hand and shook her head. "Pish-posh. The kettle has already whistled, and I have two cups steeping. You can have one along with Mr. Holt. I'll make a third for myself."

"I don't want to be a bother. I'd hate to take a cup that you'd planned for yourself."

"Nonsense," she said lifting a brow. "The cup was planned for you from the beginning. I actually like taking tea on my own after Mr. Holt gets started with his day. It allows me a moment of quiet."

"Millicent, I can't seem to find my hat!" A voice called from the other room.

With a sigh, Mrs. Holt said, "It's here on the hook by the door."

Cora couldn't help but smile when Mrs. Holt winked at her. Their happiness and morning routine reminded her a bit of her father and mother just a short year ago. Father hadn't done this sort of bickering with her, but had seemed to become much more self-reliant when Mother had passed. She wondered if it was a way that all married couples bonded. Husbands seemed to need their wives to help care for them, but didn't want for their daughters to take quite the same position.

Mr. Holt appeared again in the hallway, looking a little more composed and offering that wide smile that Cora was becoming accustomed to. He nodded toward her again. "I believe Millicent made

us some tea. Let's go partake of a cup before we head out in that dreadful cold. What do you say?"

Cora smiled back. "Yes, of course."



The deputy sitting across the desk in the sheriff's office frowned and crossed his arms over his chest as he leaned back in his chair. "The judge will be here on Monday. I don't know why I need to answer any questions before he even arrives for this case."

Mr. Holt sat next to Cora in a plain wooden chair and offered the same genuine smile he always did to the deputy as well. "This is quite ordinary, Deputy, I assure you. Your sheriff certainly wouldn't have given us use of his office for this deposition if it wasn't commonplace, would he? How often do you get the chance to sit in the sheriff's chair... with his permission, after all?"

The deputy suddenly straightened, and his arms fell to his sides. The expression on his face went from boredom and confusion to one that was immediately flustered. He lost some of the color in his cheeks as he thought about the lawyer had just said. "Fine," he said once he'd regained his composure. "What do you need to know?"

Mr. Holt held his pen against the paper in the book he brought with him. His grin softened and his face grew more serious as he looked down at his paper, he said, "Just let us know exactly what you witnessed, so that we know how you saw things."

"It wasn't just how I saw things. It was what happened," the deputy said, his brow furrowing.

Without looking up, Mr. Holt nodded. "As you say."

The deputy humphed, but he began, "I heard a gunshot and was heading in the direction of the new bank by taking a shortcut through the alley by the saloon. That's when I saw Mr. Cross came running halfway up the alley. In one hand he held a gun and in the other a bank bag. As soon as he saw me, he turned tail and fled. I gave chase, and when I made a turn down the next alley, I found the man on the ground unconscious. Beside him was the Pinkerton agent, and in his hand was the gun that we found."

"How fast do you run, Deputy?" Mr. Holt asked.

The man's brow creased more. "What do you mean?"

Mr. Holt looked up. "The alley beside the saloon is less than one hundred yards. If Mr. Cross was halfway up the alley, as you say, and it took him a moment to turn about, you would have started running immediately after him, right?"

The deputy nodded. "That's right. I called out for him to stop, but he continued to turn, and I immediately gave chase."

"Were you gaining on him then?"

"I... I believe so."

"Excellent. As the man was nearly fifty yards away, could you identify his features? It was a little past four in the afternoon, making it not long before the sun sets. Between the saloon and the Haberdashery, the sun would not cast much light in the alley at that time of day."

Arms crossed once more, the deputy frowned. "The man in the alley was Mr. Cross, without question. He wore a brown suit, and the hat up on his head was a darker shade of brown. When I found him unconscious in the alley behind the saloon, he looked exactly as he did when I first spotted him."

"But you did not see his face or wouldn't be able to identify his features, then?"

"What difference would that make? He looked exactly as he did in both of the alleys."

"Right," Mr. Holt said, nodding and jotting something down in his book. "But what made the man unconscious?"

The deputy shrugged. "How should I know? Perhaps he tripped over the Pinkerton agent he'd just shot and hit his head upon the ground. The man's face was bruised and battered. It seemed the Pinkerton agent had given him quite a fight. Even one of his eyes were swollen. Maybe he couldn't see well in the darkness of the alley, like you said."

"Hmmm..." Mr. Holt tapped the back of his pen against his lip. "Then, did you hear him cry out as he fell?"

Eyes narrowing, the deputy shook his head. "No one cried out."

"It's quite an ordinary response to cry out as you fall. Interesting that he didn't. Did the gun fire again when he hit the ground?"

"It did not"

"That can often happen when a person tries to catch himself while

falling, does it not? Also, Mr. Cross has no abrasions on his hands from the fall. It seems that he didn't try to catch himself at all, if he fell when you claim he did. What of the injury on the back of my client's head? Have you heard his own claim that he was knocked by something from the rear?"

The deputy leaned forward and dropped one arm to his side as he pointed with the other. "Look here. Mr. Cross owns the very weapon that shot the Pinkerton Agent. He admits that it's his. How do I know that the injury to the back of his head wasn't given to him by the Pinkerton when the two fought in a scuffle? And maybe the man didn't try to catch himself because he fainted. Maybe he succumbed to his injuries and fell the the ground, unconscious."

Mr. Holt shrugged. "Perhaps. But perhaps he'd already succumbed to those injuries before you ever saw a man in the first alley. Perhaps the true assailant ran from you, put the gun in the hand of Mr. Cross, who he'd left unconscious on the ground when they'd scuffled earlier, and also pressed the hat upon Mr. Cross's head."

The deputy tilted his head and gave a deadpan expression. "But the hat belonged to Mr. Cross as well. How do you explain that?"

For a moment, Mr. Holt continued writing and didn't look up to answer the question. But Cora couldn't stand the pregnant pause and felt the need to interject. She cleared her throat and steeled herself to not sound timid. "Perhaps the true assailant had stolen Mr. Cross's hat and was planning to keep it. But when he'd run into you in the first alley, he abandoned the idea and put back upon the unconscious Mr. Cross's head."

Although Cora had felt good about what she'd said, she felt a bit smaller when the deputy's icy glare narrowed upon her. "And just who are you?" he asked.

"My assistant," Mr. Holt said, offering her a smile before returning his gaze back to the deputy. "She is free to ask you any question or to interject at will during this deposition. She is a future lawyer, after all."

"Future..." the deputy started and then shook his head. "Fine. But it certainly seems that the two of you are concocting quite a story here."

Mr. Holt gestured with a hand as though he waited for Cora to continue.

Cora blinked, unsure what to say, but then an idea struck her. She felt a little more confident, as she asked, "But what happened to the bank bag? If you were chasing Mr. Cross, certainly he would have had the bag in his hand still when he'd fallen over the Pinkerton agent."

The frown on the deputy's face deepened. "He must have hidden it."

"But it hasn't been found? Did you not search the two alleys?"

Leaning back in his chair, taking a defensive posture again, the deputy replied, "We did."

"And what of the bank bag?"

"It's not yet been recovered."

"Then if Mr. Cross didn't have time to do much more than fall over unconscious in the alley, how could he have hidden the bank bag so well so quickly?" she asked.

After a couple of seconds, the deputy shrugged. "Perhaps he had an accomplice who'd been waiting in that alley. Maybe the accomplice took the bag and ran with it."

"Hmmm..." Mr. Holt said again, tapping his pen once more. "The second alley is almost as long as the first. Did you see anyone else in it?"

"I was focused upon the man I'd been chasing," said the deputy with a frown, his hands fisting on the desk. "I didn't see anyone else."

Cora shrugged. "Then it seems we are not the only ones who are making suppositions here, are we?"

The deputy's jaw locked, and he stood, his hands fisted at his sides. "Are we finished here? I have quite a bit more work to do today."

As Mr. Holt drew to his feet, Cora slowly stood with him. He put his pen in his breast pocket and closed his book. "Yes, we're quite finished. Thank you for your time, deputy."

Once they had said their goodbyes and thanks to the sheriff, Cora and Mr. Holt stepped outside once more into the faded winter sunlight. Across the street, some children had found a snowbank that had been hidden in an alley where the sun didn't shine and melt it. They worked toward making a snowman and their laughter reached Cora, ringing a chord within her that made her think once more of the holidays and her mother. Because of what had happened with Jonas and the work on the case, she'd almost forgotten again about the upcoming holiday. She'd need to go to the butcher and make sure she

ordered a roast and got the other ingredients she'd need from the general store.

"You did well in there," Mr. Holt said from beside her.

She startled, pulling herself out of her list-making. Her face flushed. "Oh, I didn't do much."

"You said enough to make the deputy lose his composure. It means that he is second guessing himself. As he should. The judge will need to hear the evidence directly from the deputy himself, but the deputy is going to be thinking about the validity of his witness now. And that's a good thing."

"Will he withdraw himself from the trial, then?" Cora asked.

"Not likely, but he'll have to consider the possibility that the suppositions we'd made were potentially true. And he'll respond in one of two ways. He'll either become bull-headed and dig his heels in harder, refusing to budge on what he'd seen, or he'll doubt himself. Either way it's in our favor with the judge. With the questions we are asking, we'll create a reasonable doubt that the deputy is a reliable witness. Without question, there was a third party in that alley. It was either an accomplice who took the bank bag and ran with it, or it was the true culprit who framed Jonas, as we believe is the case," Mr. Holt said with a nod as he walked in the general direction of his office.

Looking again at the faded sun in the sky behind the cover of clouds, Cora noticed that it was nearly noon. "Should we get something to eat for lunch?"

Mr. Holt smiled and shook his head. "It can wait a bit. Mrs. Holt will be glad to feed us both after we do something first."

"What should we do?"

He stopped in his tracks and turned toward her. "Let us visit the scene of the crime? Shall we? Perhaps we will find some clue that our deputy or even the sheriff might have missed. Often when lawman feel that they have caught their culprit, they stop looking for the possibility of another. It's up to us to look for the potential evidence that there might have been exactly that."

Cora's eyes widened in awe. "Back home in Connecticut, it seemed that lawyers spent most of their days in offices or courtrooms. I didn't know that they often visited the scene of a crime."

With a shrug, Mr. Holt continued toward the alley by the saloon. "We are in the Wild West, my dear. Out here we need to do things in a

little more... rustic way, I suppose.”

Joy bubbled up inside her. This wasn't at all what she'd been expecting to do as a potential aide to Mr. Gibson, the lawyer. If she took on Mr. Holt's offer of apprenticeship, would this be the kind of lawyering she could expect to do? The thought of it excited her, and she was a little surprised by that feeling.



Two hours later, the excitement that Cora had felt waned completely. Searching through the alleyway had been both tedious and hopeless. Mr. Holt, on the other hand seemed to be in the same high spirits that he'd been when he first suggested that they search the area. "Here's one more type of shoe. All in all, how many different shoe prints have we now found?"

"Seven," Cora answered. "But there have been several areas that have been so scuffled that it would be difficult to determine if there is a new print among the many or not."

Mr. Holt straightened and shook his head. "Not at all. Even among the scuffled areas, there are prints that lead to and away from them. It's easy to distinguish each set by the length of the foot as well as the stride length and the wear marks from the way that each man stands." He lifted up his foot so that Cora could see the bottom of it and tapped his ruler against the sole. "See here, my heel wears first on the outside. You can see that in my prints."

Cora nodded and then looked harder at the prints. She was starting to see what Mr. Holt meant, but didn't quite know the significance of it all.

"So seven men have been in this alley from the day of the crime. Mr. Cross, the Pinkerton man, Duke Carrington. The deputy—no, I think we could say that all three deputies were likely here on the scene as they searched for the bank bag. And the sheriff. That leaves one set of prints yet unaccounted for. They are a gentleman's shoe, eleven inches in length, four and a half inches in width at the widest point." Mr. Holt looked up and in the direction of the alley next to the saloon. "They go in the direction of that alley, they are in the scuffle, and it appears they may come back. Then, unfortunately, they mix in too much with the other footprints to tell for certain if they left the other direction of the alley, toward the stage coach office. But still, we may have found our culprit's prints."

Cora's eyes widened. "Regardless, there was someone else in this alley."

"Right," Mr. Holt said after jotting something down in his book. "We cannot be certain they aren't the prints of someone who came after the incident... or even before, but it's still promising that there are another set of prints. It's just as likely that they are anyone's prints as they are our specific culprit's. There's at least a fifty-fifty chance."

Nodding, Cora straightened, looking both ways up the alley. "Tomorrow, we talk to the other witness?"

"Yes," Mr. Holt flipped a page in his book and read it before saying, "a Clint Bolling. He's a traveling salesperson, and has been in town nearly a week. I talked to George at the general store, and he said the man was selling some medicinal tonics and some brushes. George informed me that the brushes were of varying qualities, but he did buy a few for the store. The tonics, in his opinion, weren't much more than hogwash. But that's just the opinion of the store keep. Regardless, we'll meet with Mr. Bolling tomorrow morning."

Something inside Cora's stomach clenched. Though they'd found a few things that might have pointed to the truth of Jonas's account of what had happened—the footprint, and the weakness behind the deputy's witness—tomorrow they would be talking to a man who claimed to have seen the shooting and the actual robbery. Would he have not seen Jonas's face, either? Was it possible that they would find his account to be as tenuous as the other? The worry in Cora tensed her shoulders.

Mr. Holt laid a hand on one of those shoulders. "Now, now, young lady. No need to get yourself worked up over nothing. Tomorrow will worry of itself, so we just need to worry about today. And right now, we should go ahead and get that luncheon before Mrs. Holt is ready to serve supper."

AFTER EATING WITH THE HOLTS, Mrs. Holt gave Cora some sandwiches to take over to Jonas. She stopped at the bank first to speak with her father and make sure that he was all right with her going over to the jailhouse alone again. The tension in his expression said that he did not like the idea, but he still nodded and gave his

permission. The sheriff welcomed her, and Cora was glad to see that he was alone. She wasn't sure she wanted another run-in with the deputy they'd interviewed that morning.

When Jonas saw her, he immediately drew to his feet. "Cora! You... you didn't need to come again. You needn't come at all. This is no place for a lady, and I... honestly, I don't like you seeing me this way."

Cora smiled wide and came forward with her parcel. "Don't worry about any of that. I know you must be hungry, and Mrs. Holt made you sandwiches again. I'm just here to deliver them."

His eyes softened and his shoulders lowered as he bowed slightly. "Please thank her for me."

"Of course," Cora said and nodded and then handed him the tied off kerchief through the bars.

He took the package, drawing fully into the light and allowing Cora to get a better look at him. It had now been two days since the incident where he'd gotten his injuries. And without question, Jonas was healing already. The swelling around his eye had lessened so that she was able to see the hazel eye underneath. His bruising had gotten better as well as his split lip. Her heart gripped in her chest. If Jonas had been in a scuffle with the Pinkerton agent, it would certainly explain his injuries. But Jonas offered no explanation for them outside of the wound to the back of his head. If he was unconscious on the ground, how was he beaten about the face so badly? Jonas rubbed the back of his neck, his face flushing. "I really wish you wouldn't see me like this Cora. I... I'd prefer if you don't visit me again."

Her stomach sank at the thought. She fisted her hands. "What do you mean?"

He turned away from her slightly and took a step backward. "You were staring. I'm not myself. This isn't ordinarily me."

She huffed. "Of course, it's not ordinarily you, Jonas. I've known you for five years and never even seen you as much as raise your voice at someone, much less end up in fisticuffs with anybody. And I wasn't staring. I was assessing your injuries. They are getting better, I'm glad to say. Still, you should press something cold against your eye as often as you can stand it."

"I have been," he said with a smile. "I've been pressing it against the iron bars whenever I'm given a chance alone. That's how I've been

able to see again with it, I think. The swelling is going down then?"

"Considerably," she answered with a nod. "It won't be long before you're back to your old self, I'm glad to say. And with the judge coming in on Monday. It's better that you're healed and looking less a ruffian—if we need to go to trial."

He straightened and took a step forward again. "If? Did the lawyer make headway with the case? Does it look like I might be able to avoid trial?"

Chiding herself, Cora took a step back. "I don't honestly know, Jonas. The lawyer is re-interviewing all of the witnesses. We spent some time looking at the crime scene this afternoon. He's building a case to prove your innocence."

"But am I not supposed to be innocent until proven guilty."

"Yes, of course you are. But I even learned that while studying the law, sometimes there's enough evidence against you that you look guilty even when you're not. Then it's up to you and your lawyer to prove that you could be innocent, too. That's what reasonable doubt is all about."

He let out a slow breath, looking dejected. Then he met eyes with her again. "Is this Mr. Holt any good? Is he doing a good job?"

"He is. I have full faith in him," Cora said with conviction. "He presses the witnesses and goes the extra mile. He does everything himself instead of having many assistants like the lawyers I knew back in Norwalk."

Nodding, Jonas smiled. "That's good to hear. If you say he's good, then he must be. I just thought that maybe he'd be too much of a softy. He's very friendly, and with that jovial smile and laugh, he reminds me a bit of Saint Nicholas."

The skin on Cora's arms prickled and she couldn't stop the chuckle that bubbled up. "He really does look a bit like Saint Nicholas."

Jonas laughed a little more heartily. "I'm glad I'm not the only one to think so. Perhaps it will be fortuitous that we have Saint Nicholas fighting for us this close to Christmas."

Shaking her head, Cora chided him, "You best not let Mr. Holt hear you saying something like that. As friendly as he is, all lawyers have a harsh side to them. I'd rather he kept that for his opposition in the courtroom."

"I would too," Jonas said as he stepped back once more and leaned

against the wall, unwrapping the kerchief on his sandwiches. "Again, please tell Mrs. Holt thank you for these. And you don't need to bring anything tomorrow. I'll be fine."

"Nonsense," she said, feeling a bit of anger churning her stomach. "I don't care what you look like, Jonas. It doesn't change how I feel about you or my opinion of you. You are a great and honest man. You are not a thief or a ruffian, no matter if you have bruises or stand behind iron bars. My sole purpose right now is to see you free, and I plan to keep coming to assuage your hunger and lift your spirits every day that you are here, no matter how long that might be."

Jonas had stopped, his jaw dropped with a sandwich halfway to his lips. A long moment, he spent just staring at Cora. Finally, he lowered his hand and offered her a soft smile with sad eyes. "Thank you, Cora. You'll never know how much you... and what you said... means to me."

Her heart fluttered at his words. The way he was looking at her was different than any way he'd looked at her before. Like... he loved her—more than just as a sister. The moment she realized it, her heart thumped wildly in her chest, and she needed to retreat. To think. To understand what was going on. Before she embarrassed herself. She could feel the blush rising in her cheeks. Without a single thought, she turned on her heel and didn't look back as she said, "I've got to go."

Cora was out on the street breathing heavily in the cool afternoon air faster than she realized. Wasn't this what she'd always wanted? Didn't she want for Jonas to look at her this way, to acknowledge her as a woman rather than a young lady? Why was it so scary that he finally did? Her heart thrummed in her chest as she bent over, feeling a wee bit nauseous. Yes, it was exactly what she'd always wanted, but right now, romance had been the furthest thing from her mind over the past two days as she'd been trying to help Jonas prove his innocence. It all just came crashing back onto her at once. Her feelings for him, her hope that he would have feelings for her. All of it had gone to the wayside while she concentrated on helping Mr. Holt. She took three more deep breaths and then straightened as the feeling of sickness passed. She held a hand over her still-beating-heavily heart. As much as it wanted her to acknowledge it and her feelings for Jonas, she needed it to calm down and keep things under control. Her hand fisted. For now, she would push all of that to the side again. She'd

have time to think on these things later. Setting one foot in front of the other, she started toward home.



Clint Bolling was a man who was hard to track down. Cora supposed it was because he was a traveling salesman. Perhaps that sort of man didn't do well to sit in one place, but she and Mr. Holt were not able to catch up with him until the afternoon. They had spent most of the day going from place to place where the man had already been, looking for him. It seemed that he'd spent some time selling, some time shopping, and a bit of time in a few different eateries. It was at the haberdashery that they finally caught up with the man.

He was all smiles. "So, what do you think, young lady? Hand-felted wool or beaver skin? I need to replace the hat I lost in St. Louis. Which would look better?"

Cora stifled a groan and barely managed to keep her lips from frowning as Mr. Bolling placed a gray hat upon his head and then switched it with a tan one. "Both are very nice."

They'd watched the man trying on several different hats over the past quarter hour, following him around the store, trying to talk to him. But the man seemed more interested in how these hats looked upon his head than in providing his witness for Mr. Holt. The lawyer, however, didn't seem to be losing his patience the way that Cora felt. He had his notebook and pen out, and serenely asked the same question for the third time. "Do you recall what happened in the alley on Tuesday? You witnessed the robbery there and the shooting of the Pinkerton agent."

"I think I'll go with the beaver. It will go better with the two new suits that I purchased yesterday." Mr. Bolling set the tan hat upon his head and then proceeded to the front of the store to pay for it. Finally his gaze slid across Mr. Holt's as he sighed. "And I already told the sheriff and his deputy what I saw. I don't understand why I need to discuss it again. It's bad enough that I have to remain in town until the judge's scheduled visit next week."

"This is quite ordinary, Mr. Bolling, I assure you. The accused's lawyer has a right to question witnesses while preparing for the man's defense." Mr. Holt's smile didn't falter.

The gentleman huffed. "Defense? I saw that he did it. A deputy saw him as well. What defense could he possibly have?"

"Well, Mr. Bolling, that's what I'm here for and why I need to know what it is that you saw. Sometimes our eyes can play tricks on us."

"Is that what you think?" Mr Bolling's eyes narrowed on Mr. Holt. "I assure you that I saw what I saw and nothing else. Without question, that man in jail... Mr. Frost... Cost... whatever his name was. He is the one I saw in the alley shooting and killing that Pinkerton agent."

"It's Cross," Cora said, her own ire rising. "And the Pinkerton man, Mr. Carrington, is not dead."

"Yet," Mr. Bolling said with a finger in the air, shaking his head. Then his face, which had been smiling, fell into a solemn expression. "God rest the man's soul. I hear they have a preacher by his side most of the day as though waiting to give him his last rites."

Something about this gentleman seemed not quite right to Cora. She shot a glance at Mr. Holt to see if he felt the same way, but the lawyer's expression had remained unchanged. With a smile still on his lips, Mr. Holt said, "We are sorry to interrupt your day, Mr. Bolling, but would you please mind telling us exactly what you saw on Tuesday? I'd be happy to treat you to tea at the shop next door so we can sit down someplace and talk."

The man brightened a bit again at the suggestion. "That would be a welcome repose. I imagine I will feel quite refreshed after a spot of tea."

And with that, he left the haberdashery with his new tan hat placed firmly upon his head. Mr. Holt followed, and Cora was close behind, feeling a bit perturbed still. When they entered the tea shop, they were greeted immediately by the older English lady who ran the establishment. She showed them to a table and offered to get tea and crumpets for them. Even though Mr. Holt had offered to pay, Mr. Bolling ordered everything as though he were the one who had offered to treat.

Once the tea service was set in front of them, the lady of the shop

poured them each a cup. When she'd left their table, Mr. Holt pulled out his notebook and pen and asked, "What brought you past the alley at about four o'clock on Tuesday afternoon?"

Mr. Bolling's face grew serious once more as he pulled his cup from his lips and set it back in its saucer. He looked up toward the ceiling as though drawing out a memory. "I had finished talking to the gentleman who runs the general store and made a deal with him to return with more of our fine, high-quality brushes, and then decided to get a drink at the saloon to help me wind down from the day. Often after making a sale, I'll celebrate in such a way. I was passing by the alleyway when I heard a shout and a scuffle. The gentleman now in a jail cell and the Pinkerton agent were both in fisticuffs. At the time I had no idea that it was anything more than a drunken brawl between two saloon patrons. Now, far be it for me to intervene in that sort of thing, but I did look about for the sheriff or a deputy if there happened to be one nearby. When I looked away for but a moment, I heard a gunshot. I jumped out of the way of the alley, taking cover, but when I heard nothing more, I peered around the corner. On the ground lay the Pinkerton agent, and the other man in the scuffle was nowhere to be found."

To punctuate his finished account, Mr. Bolling took a sip of his tea again.

"Then there was no one else around? No one else in the alleyway?" Cora asked, in hopes that one of the theories that Mr. Holt had presented before about another person might be true.

Mr. Bolling shook his head. "No one else. Although I did see the man return soon after, at a run. And apparently trip and fall next to the Pinkerton agent soon after. Then the deputy came in the alley as well."

Cora stared at the man. Was it true then? Was it possible that Jonas could have robbed the bank's deposit and shot the Pinkerton agent? Both witnesses' accounts seemed to converge. None of the theories that Mr. Holt had presented with the deputy were being confirmed by this witness. Her heart fell toward her stomach.

Mr. Holt cleared his throat. "Did you step foot into the alley yourself? To check on the man who lay on the ground or to help the deputy?"

Mr. Bolling shook his head. "I didn't at all. It was as though my

feet were frozen to the ground as I watched the proceedings unfold. Besides, I had my hands full with the case of brushes and tonics I was carrying at the time.”

“No one else entered the alley to help?” Mr. Holt asked.

“No one. For a fine Tuesday afternoon in a city such as this, a crowd of people who heard the gunshot would have been expected, but it was slow to form. By the time the gawkers had arrived, the deputy had already secured the scene and asked for one in the crowd who he knew to go and fetch the sheriff.” Mr. Bolling took hold of a crumpet and shoved half of it into his mouth. Some of the powdered sugar on the top clung to his mustache.

Mr. Holt nodded. “That is a fine suit you are wearing today. You said that you had ordered two more at the tailor’s yesterday?”

With pride, Mr. Bolling plucked the sleeve of his suit coat and nodded. “I did. And you have quite a good eye. I bought this suit from a shop in New York City a long time ago. It’s my lucky one. I have never failed to make a sale while wearing this sharp attire.”

“Were you wearing this suit on Tuesday, for the sale in the general store?”

The man’s smile broadened. “Why yes, in fact. I was wearing this very suit. I only have two of them and, as I said before, this one is my lucky one.”

“What color is your other suit?”

Shrugging, the man took hold of another crumpet and slanted it toward his lips. “Brown. A wise woman once told me that it was a color that went best for salesmen as it made them look more honest and like men of the earth. She has never once let me down with that advice. The two suits I bought yesterday are the same color as well.”

Mr. Holt nodded and stood, offering a hand toward the gentleman. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Bolling.”

Cora scrambled to stand with him, suddenly feeling confused. The expression on Mr. Bolling’s face twisted as well as he set his crumpet down and stood to take Mr. Holt’s offered hand. “But we’re not yet done with the tea,” the man said.

Mr. Holt smiled. “I’m afraid we’ve taken up quite enough of your time, and we have other engagements as well today. Please enjoy the tea for as long as you like, as I will settle up with the matron before leaving.”

The smile returned to the man's lips as he began to return to his seat. "Don't mind if I do, then."

"Have a nice day," Mr. Holt said and turned toward the door with his hat in hand. Cora followed him, mumbling a similar sentiment.

Once they stood outside, Mr. Holt placed his hat upon his head and turned toward Cora, his smile a bit more cunning than she'd seen before.

"What is it?" he asked.

He peered over her shoulder back into the tea shop and turned back around, offering her an arm. "Come with me, my dear. We have a lot of work to do."

"Where are we headed?"

"To see the Pinkerton agent," he answered as she took his arm.

"What kind of work are you talking about?" she asked, looking up at him after they'd walked a short bit down the Main Street.

Mr. Holt nodded, his pace never faltering and continued to look ahead. "I believe that man, Mr. Bolling is not a witness, but the culprit."

Cora gasped. "Are you certain?"

He shook his head, his expression becoming serious. "No, I can't be certain until we have more evidence, but I am almost sure. I would place a wager upon it, if I were a gambling man."

Blinking, Cora asked, "He did seem a bit strange, but I didn't think that made him a suspect."

"Well, let's think things through. What about him made him strange to you?"

Cora paused, thinking, listening to the soles of their shoes keep a steady rhythm along the boardwalk in front of the inn and then change when they returned to the stone. "His mannerisms seemed a bit strange. Every salesperson I'd seen in the past would at least try to sell everyone they meet one of their wares, but he offered us nothing. In fact, he didn't even have his case of goods with him. He was spending more time buying instead of selling."

"As if he might have recently come into a bit more money than he was used to having, you mean?"

Nodding, Cora placed a hand over her quickening heart. "Five thousand dollars would be a great deal of money."

"It would. It's more than most people see at once in their lifetime.

Is there anything else about him that was peculiar?"

They turned a corner while Cora thought. "I'm not sure."

"Do you remember anything about the deputy's witness of what happened that might point toward the possibility that Mr. Bolling was the culprit?"

She swallowed. Mr. Holt was leading her, helping her to see things the way that he did. He had confidence in her, so she could do this. What was it about the witness that would say that it could just as easily be Mr. Bolling as it was Jonas? A picture of Jonas as he was in the jail cell popped into her head and her eyes widened. "The suit he was wearing was brown. Jonas was wearing a brown suit too."

"Yes, and our Mr. Bolling was without a hat."

"Right. He said he'd lost it in Saint Louis."

"So, perhaps one of my conjectures that he had stolen Mr. Cross's hat is a distinct possibility. When he'd been spotted by the deputy, he returned the hat and returned to his position at the end of the alleyway. I might also suspect that he placed the bag of money in his formerly abandoned bag of brushes and wares, as well."

Cora's eyes widened. "Would it truly be possible? Could we check? Or ask the sheriff to check?"

Shaking his head, Mr. Holt's lips drew thin. "Unfortunately not. Right now, we have nothing more than conjecture. However, the man also had a bit of bruising over the knuckles on his right hand, consistent with a possible scuffle, and his shoes appeared to be the correct size and width."

"You could tell just by looking at them?"

"I placed my foot next to his and made a quick comparison when we were at the haberdasher."

Cora's jaw dropped for a moment before she remembered it was unladylike and closed her lips quickly. Then she asked, "Is there any chance we could find enough evidence to have Mr. Bolling searched?"

Just then Mr. Holt stopped, and Cora realized they stood in front of the doctor's office. "If we are fortunate, we'll find what we need here."

Cora looked up at the office, her heart squeezing in her chest. It would be a blessing if the Pinkerton agent would awaken and could point to the man who shot him. Would that be possible? Mr. Holt started up the front porch steps and Cora followed.



“What are your plans for the holidays, Lionel? Will your son and his family be visiting?” Mr. Holt asked the doctor who sat across from them in the small office space on the first floor.

Different tinctures and herbs and medicinal smells surrounded them. The building was a less than half the size of the hospital that she’d visited her mother in back at Norwalk, but Kansas City was still a growing town, and would likely need more than just a doctor’s office soon enough.

The doctor, Lionel Reynolds, was a close friend of Mr. Holt’s, though they hadn’t apparently visited with each other since the summer. Dr. Reynolds smiled. “Yes, actually. I’m expecting Jude and his lovely wife to visit on the train tomorrow afternoon. I haven’t yet seen my new granddaughter, Penelope—they named her after both my Penelope and Emily’s mother as well. Penelope Dorothy Reynolds. Quite a lovely name, isn’t it?”

“Beautiful,” Cora agreed when he shone his smile upon her.

“Christmas this year is going to be truly special.” The doctor’s smile faded as he grew more serious, “I just hope that our Mr. Carrington will be awake by then. We sent a telegram to tell the Pinkerton office about the state he’s in and the situation here, but we have yet to have word about whether Mr. Carrington had family or what arrangements are to be made if he... if he were to meet his unfortunate end.”

Mr. Holt nodded, his face grave as well. “And how likely is it that Mr. Carrington will slip away? Does he have a chance of recovery?”

The chair the doctor sat upon squeaked as he leaned back into it. “I performed surgery right away and was able to remove the bullet. I sewed up the vessels and stopped the bleeding, but Mr. Carrington had already lost a great deal of blood. We’ve been doing our best to feed him broth and sugar water as much as possible, but he’s difficult to rouse and rarely stays more than semi-conscious but for a moment.

If he doesn't wake completely up soon, I'm afraid he will slip away. He's already lost weight, and his color might be improving, but it's hard to tell for certain."

"That is very sad to hear. I was hoping that Mr. Carrington would be well before the judge comes on Monday. At least then he could point to the man who might have shot him." Mr. Holt looked down at his hands.

"You are of the belief, then, that the man they have in custody isn't the culprit?" The doctor asked.

Mr. Holt looked back up again, offering a soft smile. "As his lawyer, it is my duty to prove my client's innocence if possible."

"But isn't it sometimes impossible?"

Mr. Holt straightened. "In this case, I believe it's more than possible. I believe there is another suspect, a man who is the true culprit in this case."

The doctor's eyes widened as he leaned forward, and his chair squeaked again. "Who is it?"

Cora's heart skipped a beat in her chest, and she almost blurted the name herself, but she was glad she didn't when Mr. Holt shook his head. "I cannot divulge that without evidence. But you can help me with that, Lionel."

Blinking, the doctor asked, "Me? What could I possibly do?"

Leaning forward again, Mr. Holt let out a slow breath before he began. "I need you to lie for me, Lionel, do you think you can do that?"

*

THE NEXT DAY, Cora stood in the kitchen with Mrs. Holt, making gingerbread cookies. Her nerves were on edge. Mr. Holt had divulged his plan with both the doctor and the sheriff. They placed a deputy at the hospital in case Mr. Bolling had nefarious intentions and then the sheriff and the rest of his men were at the train station, awaiting the two-p.m. arrival from St. Louis.

"Watching the clock won't make it go any faster," Mrs. Holt said with a soft smile.

Cora chided herself. She hadn't realized that she'd been looking at the clock again. Then she looked down and realized she was wringing

her apron, too. Dropping the cloth from her hands, she sat down heavily in the chair. "What if things don't go according to Mr. Holt's plans? What if he's entirely wrong and Mr. Bolling isn't even the culprit? Or what if Mr. Bolling doesn't get word about Mr. Carrington's condition?"

Mrs. Holt opened the oven, filling the kitchen with the aroma of warm spices and sweet, slightly bitter molasses. With a mitt upon her hand, Mrs. Holt pulled the tray of cookies out of the oven and set it upon the stovetop to cool. It was the fourth batch they'd made. The intent was to make enough cookies to give away to the Christmas carolers who'd be at the church that evening for practice. Mrs. Holt was in charge of that night's refreshments and had asked Cora to help. Though Cora knew that half the reason was that Mr. Holt feared that she might be in danger if she were to go to the train station with him and the sheriff. Even though Cora understood that, it still didn't make her happy just to be waiting around to see how things would turn out. She huffed as Mrs. Holt pulled off each of her oven mitts and smiled at Cora. "I doubt very seriously that Mr. Holt would talk to Lionel and the sheriff about this plan if it were far-fetched. I think it's very likely to work exactly as he expects. He can be quite the surprising lawyer."

Cora couldn't help but chuckle. "I'll admit that he's surprised me quite a bit over the last few days."

Mrs. Holt gave her a knowing nod. "And I wouldn't worry too much about Mr. Bolling not hearing the news of Mr. Carrington's recovery. Mrs. Blankenship has heard it and as the town gossip it is her duty to tell every ear that will listen in all of Kansas City. I'd be surprised if it hadn't made the newspaper this morning."

Without her permission, Cora's eyes darted toward the clock on the counter. One-fifty. The train would arrive in minutes... if it was on time. She let out a slow breath, but it did nothing to slow her racing heart, and her hands fisted in her apron cloth again.

"Oh, goodness, dear. You are making me nervous now," Mrs. Holt said, swinging her kitchen towel in Cora's general direction. "Come along. While these batches cool, we'll make one more. Then I think we'll have enough for the carolers, okay? Not to mention that time will go by much faster when hands are busy."

Taking another deep breath, Cora nodded and stood. "Right. Let's get to it."

Twenty minutes later, Cora's eyes wandered back to the clock again. Had the train arrived on time? Would everything be resolved now? Her fingers ached from gripping her apron so tightly. Mrs. Holt had led her in a few Christmas songs while they were baking. Though it had helped keep her mind off of things for at least that amount of time, it didn't stop her body from immediately resuming nervous behaviors as soon as the songs stopped.

Men's voices came from the other side of the door to the kitchen, and a boot stomped at the kitchen door's stoop. Cora held her breath. It had to be Mr. Holt. From what she'd seen before, he and Mrs. Holt were the only ones who used that door in and out of their home. At least everyone was all right, but she couldn't hear what they were saying, and she couldn't tell if they sounded elated or disappointed. The door opened, and Mr. Holt stepped in with a large smile. Without saying a word, he stepped to the side and behind him stood Jonas.

Cora's heart skipped a beat. Tears stung her eyes and filled her vision, making everything blurry. Without a second thought, she rushed forward and embraced him. Before she knew it, she was sobbing, her hands fisting on the front of Jonas's suit coat.

He stroked her hair. "There, there, Cora. Everything is all right."

She found herself hitting him on the chest with her fists. "I was so frightened. So scared. How could you let yourself get hurt like this?"

"I'm sorry, darling. I'll be more careful next time."

She backed away, sniffing and swiping at her eyes. "You had better. Mr. Holt might not be able to save you so well next time."

Jonas shot a glance toward the lawyer and nodded. "Thank you very much, sir."

"It was my pleasure," said Mr. Holt's deep voice behind her.

Jonas's fingers found their way to Cora's cheek as he swiped at her tears. "Don't cry, darling."

Heat rushed to her cheeks as she realized what he'd just called her... twice. "Darling?"

A smile spread across his lips and the look of affection in his eyes was unmistakable. "I've been a fool, Cora. All this time I've been denying the feelings I had for you from the minute we met. You were too young. You were my boss's daughter. Your family was too good to me. Too good for me. I couldn't possibly take advantage of your vulnerability after you had just lost your mother. I had every excuse

not to pursue my feelings for you, but I have lost. I am all out of excuses. I love you, Cora. I've loved you for more than five years."

Fresh tears sprung in Cora's eyes as she leapt forward and embraced Jonas again. Her fists beat upon his chest gently once more. "It's about time, you imbecile."

He laughed and pushed her away gently by the shoulders. "I'm sorry again, darling. I promise to make it all up to you."

Swiping her tears again, she smiled. "You had better."

Laughing, Mrs. Holt said, "Mr. Cross, why don't you go freshen up? Mr. Holt went to your rooms at the inn and got your clean suit and other affects. They are in our guest room."

Smiling shyly, he scratched at his chin. "Now that you mention it, I'm surprised Cora even wanted to touch me the way that I smell."

Although it was true that Jonas smelled exactly as though he'd spent four days in a jail cell, somehow, Cora hadn't minded much.

"But first," Jonas said. "Mr. Holt, you owe me an explanation. How exactly did you free me? And was that the witness, Mr. Bolling, that I saw coming into the jailhouse as I left?"

Mr. Holt's fingers were about to take hold of a gingerbread cookie when Mrs. Holt's towel shot out and slapped him across the top of his hand. "Those are for the choir."

Pouting, Mr. Holt drew his hand back toward his chest as though it stung. "Can't we spare just one?"

She tilted her head. "Only if you want to sing with the carolers. I hear they are short one baritone."

Thinning his lips, Mr. Holt nodded. "Fine, I'll join them. I have no excuse now that the case is over." And with that, he took one of the cookies and ventured a bite. "It's still hot. Mmm. Good."

Shaking his head, Jonas said, "Mr. Holt?"

While Mr. Holt's mouth was full, Cora started for him. "Mr. Holt interviewed Mr. Bolling yesterday and his odd behavior led us to believe that it was possible that he was not a witness, but a suspect in your case."

Jonas's eyes widened. "Us? You were there?"

Cora nodded. "I was."

Groaning, Jonas said, "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

Crossing her arms, Cora frowned. "Well, it's already done, so there's nothing to worry about now."

“Still, I—“

“Regardless,” Cora said, interrupting him. “That was when Mr. Holt hatched a plan. I’m sure he’d like to tell you about it.”

Swallowing the bite he’d taken, Mr. Holt shook his head and sat in the kitchen chair. “Not at all, Cora. Please continue.”

Suddenly all eyes were upon her, and though Cora wasn’t horribly nervous, she swallowed hard. “Then we went to visit Dr. Reynolds and Mr. Carrington. Even though Mr. Carrington’s condition wasn’t the best, Mr. Holt asked for Dr. Reynolds to allow him to spread word that Mr. Carrington was recovering and would likely name his shooter by the time the judge arrived on Monday.”

“I had heard about that. You mean to tell me that it was a lie?” His brow wrinkled. “That’s not very Christian.”

“Well,” Mr. Holt said, looking a bit sheepish. “I agree, but we do pray for his full recovery and hope the Lord will forgive us this small indiscretion since it was for the greater good.”

“What was the greater good?” Jonas asked, confused.

“Our hope,” Cora said, “was that Mr. Bolling would hear about the recovery and then act. He was remanded to remain in town until after the trial on Monday afternoon. But if he were the culprit and Mr. Carrington was able to point to him as the shooter, then Mr. Holt felt that he would likely either leave town or try to hurt the true witness, the Pinkerton agent.”

“Is that what happened?” Jonas asked, his eyes widening.

“It is,” said Mr. Holt around his last bite of cookie. He brushed off his hands and nodded. “Twenty minutes before the two o’clock train arrived, Mr. Bolling was at the train station with his wares ready to get on as soon as he could. The sheriff and I had arrived only moments beforehand. As soon as the salesman saw the sheriff, he dropped everything and ran. Of course he didn’t go far before running into one of the deputies.”

Cora blinked at the lawyer. “So, things happened as you said?”

He nodded again. “They did. And in the bottom of the man’s brushes case was the bank’s money. Almost two hundred dollars shy of the five thousand.”

Coughing, Jonas choked out, “He spent two hundred dollars in just four days?”

“It was one of his strange behaviors,” Cora said. “We caught him

while doing an inordinate amount of shopping.”

“Amazing,” Jonas said. “Then they arrested him?”

“And he confessed,” said Mr. Holt. “He saw the bank’s money coming off the stage coach with the Pinkerton agent. He followed you and Mr. Carrington into the alley and used his pickpocketing talents to draw your pistol from your holster. He hit you over the head from behind before you’d even known he’d taken it. Then he shot Mr. Carrington. Afterwards, he decided to take your hat as well, since his was missing. Then he ran down the alley, found the sheriff’s deputy and turned about. When he returned to where you and Mr. Carrington were, he tripped over your face and ended up kicking you as well. Dropping the hat and gun upon you, he scrambled back to his feet and returned to his case of wares he’d left at the end of the alley. He stuffed the bank bag in before the onlookers arrived and then volunteered as a witness when the sheriff asked if anyone had seen what had happened.”

“That... that’s amazing.” Jonas’s eyes were wide.

“Then it was almost exactly as you’d suspected,” Cora said in awe.

Mrs. Holt patted her husband on the shoulder. “Part lawyer, part detective. That’s my husband.” Then she turned again toward Jonas. “I’ve already boiled water for a nice hot bath and will bring it up momentarily if you’d like.”

Blinking, Jonas nodded. “Thank you so much. I didn’t have much of a facility for bathing at the inn where I was staying.”

Mrs. Holt gave a knowing nod. “Cora and I will have supper ready for you by the time you are feeling more human. Do not rush.”

“Thank you again. Honestly I cannot thank you enough,” Jonas said.

Patting Jonas upon the shoulder, Mrs. Holt said, “I’m sure you can do us all a great favor and take the smell of that jailhouse off yourself as fast as possible.”

After giving Cora one last parting glance that made her heart quicken, Jonas turned with a smile and left.



Almost two weeks later, Cora sat with Jonas while they waited for the train which was set to arrive at two, their breaths in clouds around them. The two of them had wanted to get married right away, but they'd had to wait for Jonas's aunt, Katherine, to arrive. Katherine had been the woman who raised Jonas after his own mother had passed years before they'd even met. The crisp air was calling to Cora again, promising snow, though the blue sky that she could spot from under the overhang denied it. While they sat on the bench in the train station, Jonas held Cora's hands in both of his. "This is the first time that we've had a chance to touch each other since we've been courting."

Cora laughed. "My father has been keeping us apart quite well since you divulged your intentions."

He leaned in toward her. "Wouldn't he be quite surprised with how scandalously you embraced me when I came to the Holt's house after my release."

She attempted to pull her hand away, but he gripped it harder. "Oh pish-posh. I wasn't quite myself at the time. One might say I felt a bit childish... instead of lady-like that day."

He lifted her hand and kissed the back of it, sending a thrill up her arm. "It's quite all right. Besides, by this time tomorrow, we'll both be wed."

Cora's heart skipped at the thought.

The train's whistle sounded in the distance and soon after, they could hear the sounds of the engine. Within minutes, the train pulled into the station with a cloud of steam. People began to disembark from the train, and the two of them stood from their bench, but Jonas had yet to let go of Cora's hand. As he peered over the heads of those who came from the train, Cora couldn't help but look up at him. This strong man who she'd loved for over five years loved her in return. How could she ask for more?

Families greeted each other with great hugs and kisses, some with parcels in their hands which might be imagined were presents. That bittersweet feeling came over Cora again. If she could have had one wish, it would have been that her own mother could have been there for her wedding.

“There she is,” Jonas said, and finally released Cora’s hand and stepped forward to greet a lady with red hair and a brightly colored green overcoat.

The woman’s smile broadened, and she held her arms wide, carrying parcels, just as everyone else did. “Jo! I’ve missed you so much. Come and give me some sugar.”

Color rushed to Jonas’s cheeks as he stepped into his aunt’s embrace and kissed her on the cheek. “Katherine, I’ve missed you as well.”

When they parted, Katherine smiled at Cora. “It’s about time he finally admitted his feelings for you, young lady. I knew the moment he introduced me to you three years ago that he looked at you a bit differently than he did others. I’ve been waiting for this news to arrive.”

“We telegraphed you right away, Kathrine,” Jonas said with a groan.

“And good thing you did! I rushed here right away. Oh! But not before I procured Jonas’s request,” Katherine said as she placed her parcels on a bench and sorted through them until she came to one wrapped in red. Offering the parcel to Cora, she said, “And here it is.”

“For me?” Cora asked as she took the package slowly.

“Yes,” Katherine said as her smile grew wider. “Didn’t Jonas tell you I was bringing it?”

Cora’s eyes grew wider as she shook her head as she looked between the two of them. “He didn’t tell me anything. Is it a Christmas present?”

Katherine tilted her head back and forth. “Of a kind. But it’s best if you go ahead and open it now.”

Blinking, Cora said, “Okay,” and then began to tear off the wrapper as gently as possible. A red glass jar appeared beneath, and at first Cora wasn’t sure what she was looking at, but when she realized what it was, her heart warmed in her chest and tears stung her eyes. “Cranberries.”

“Yes,” Katherine said with a laugh. “Jonas was adamant that I bring those with me.”

Emotions overflowing, Cora jumped forward and hugged Katherine, being sure not to disturb the jar in her hands. “Thank you so much.”

When she pulled back, Katherine had a sheepish look on her face. “Not sure what’s so special about cranberries, but I’m glad that I could bring them to you if they were that important.”

“Very important,” Jonas said, placing a hand on Cora’s shoulder and giving her a gentle squeeze. “For both of us.”

✦

CHRISTMAS CAME and Cora was able to serve a host of people in the Holt’s house. Mr. and Mrs. Holt offered Cora to use their kitchen and dining room, since there were so many people who had come to both the wedding and come for Christmas dinner. Everything felt sweet, and that slight tang of bitterness that had hung over the anticipation of the holiday had been subdued by the wedding and the company that they had.

Cora’s father sat at the table next to Katherine and Jonas. Mr. Holt was a gracious host, and though Cora had insisted on doing most of the work, Mrs. Holt helped her in the kitchen to make everything just right. And they had another special guest with them that made everything even more perfect. Mr. Duke Carrington had recovered enough from his injuries to attend the wedding and they’d also invited him to Christmas dinner with them. Katherine and Mr. Carrington seemed to get along very well, and there was a sparkle in both their eyes whenever the other was around. Cora wondered if there might be another wedding soon.

With a sigh of contentment, she came in from the kitchen with the very thing she’d wanted most for the holiday. Family, togetherness, and her mother’s cranberry cake.



INGREDIENTS

- 3 large eggs
- 2 cups granulated sugar
- 3/4 cup (1 1/2 sticks) unsalted butter, cubed and softened at room temperature for 1 hour
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 2 1/2 cups fresh cranberries (12 ounces)

Pecan topping (optional):

- 1/4 cup (4 tablespoons) unsalted butter
- 1/4 cup packed dark brown sugar
- 1 cup raw pecans

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Lightly grease a 10-inch springform pan.
2. Beat the eggs and sugar until very smooth and increased in volume. If using a stand mixer, beat on medium speed for 4 to 7 minutes with the whisk attachment. If using an electric hand mixer, beat on high speed for 6 to 8 minutes. The egg and sugar mixture will double in volume and turn very pale yellow, leaving ribbons on top of the batter when you lift the beaters.
3. Beat in the butter, vanilla, and almond extract, if using. Beat for 2 minutes or until the butter is smoothly incorporated.
4. Use a spatula to fold in the flour, salt, and cranberries. The

batter will be quite thick. Spread gently into the prepared pan.

5. To prepare the optional pecan topping, melt the butter in a large sauté pan over medium heat. Add the sugar and stir. Add the pecans and cook for about 2 minutes, stirring, until the butter and sugar mixture is shiny and smooth, and the nuts are well-coated with butter and sugar. Spread over the cake batter.
6. Bake 60 to 80 minutes for the springform. Tent the cake with foil in the last 30 minutes of baking to keep the top from browning (this is especially important for the pecan topping).
7. Cool for 20 minutes then run a knife around the inside edge of the pan and remove the cake. Cool for an hour before serving.

Storage: The cake keeps and freezes well. To store, wrap the fully cooled cake tightly in plastic wrap and leave in a dry, cool place for up to 1 week. To freeze, wrap the fully cooled cake in plastic wrap and then foil. Freeze for up to 2 months. Thaw overnight at room temperature, still wrapped.

About the Series



The books in this series are standalone stories you don't want to miss, and each of these historical romances features a traditional holiday recipe for you to enjoy!

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About the Author



P. Creeden is the sweet romance and mystery pen name for USA Today Bestselling Author, Pauline Creeden. Her stories feature down-to-earth characters who often feel like they are undeserving of love for one reason or another and are surprised when love finds them.

Animals are the supporting characters of many of her stories, because they occupy her daily life on the farm, too. From dogs, cats, and goldfish to horses, chickens, and geckos -- she believes life around pets is so much better, even if they are fictional. P. Creeden married her college sweetheart, who she also met at a horse farm. Together they raise a menagerie of animals and their one son, an avid reader, himself.

If you enjoyed this story, look forward to more books by P. Creeden.

In 2022, she plans to release more than six new books!

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